

By: Steve Taylor

Rebecca Shultz can speak of the dangers of methamphetamine in the way that only a woman who has been forced to choose between her son and her grandchildren can speak.

Shultz attended a conference Sunday afternoon on the drug and what local, state and federal officials are doing to combat it. The conference was held at the Leo C. Peck Media Center on the Fox Campus in Arnold. The conference was sponsored by Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-3rd District.

Shultz, a registered nurse who lives in Arnold, said that about three years ago, she suspected that her son and his wife were involved in methamphetamines. She issued an ultimatum - clean up their act or risk being turned in to authorities. She said she turned them in.

"That must have been a very tough decision," Carnahan said.

"It was a very easy decision," she replied. "My choice was to turn my son in or bury my three grandchildren."

She told the audience of her two frustrations after she made those calls - a criminal justice system that tends to be lenient toward women defendants, and the seeming inevitability of her grandchildren being reunited with their parents. She said that she tangled often with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, the county prosecuting attorney's office, the Missouri Division of Family Services and other agencies to try to prevent her grandchildren from being returned to her son and daughter-in-law.

Shultz said in an interview that she and her ex-husband share custody of the grandchildren. "I've been fighting this for years," she said, adding, "This has cost me \$9,000 for lawyers."

Carnahan said later that Shultz's story summed up the meth situation.

"It's so highly addictive on one hand, and on the other hand, it's highly toxic to families, to neighborhoods," the congressman said. "It affects schools, health care. To hear this really heartbreaking story, it really brings it home."

Sheriff Glenn Boyer said he sympathized with Shultz's plight.

"Unfortunately, this is a fairly typical drug case. An individual is under arrest and then released on bond. It might take six to nine months for that individual to go to court on that case. In the meantime, how can DFS react if that individual hasn't been convicted of a crime?"

Boyer told the audience that Jefferson County leads the state and the nation in methamphetamine-related drug arrests and seizures because he and other officials are committed to combating the problem.

"It's not because the problem is worse in Jefferson County. It's because we were willing to put more resources to the problem. But the resources have to come from somewhere."

Boyer said that his office's call-response rate to many other types of call are far above average and that years of tight budgeting are taking their toll.

"Right now, I'm 16 officers down because of budget cutbacks. Some calls we take two to 2 1/2 hours to respond to."

He said a recently passed state law that requires stores to place over-the-counter cold medicines commonly used in the manufacture of meth behind counters may help somewhat.

Prosecuting Attorney Robert Wilkins called on Carnahan to address two concerns:

Providing money for Jefferson County to establish its own laboratory to process drug cases. At present, the county sends its evidence to a lab in St. Louis County. He said it can take months to verify that a substance seized at a lab is methamphetamine or another illegal substance - verification that is required for prosecution.

He said the state and federal governments need to hire people who can clean up meth labs.

"We need specially trained cleanup people. Right now, our officers are spending a third of their time doing cleanups of sites."

Carnahan said those were major points that came out of the forum.

"While law enforcement has ramped up a lot of what they're doing, and the prosecutors are ramping up their efforts, there has been a bottleneck at the labs. They can't handle the capacity of the cases. We've got to expand capacity. We're going to be looking at resources in a way that can support that."

State Reps. Tim Meadows, D-Imperial, and Jeff Roorda, D-Barnhart, said Gov. Matt Blunt's proposed budget included recommendations to close two state prisons and to cut 15 officers from the Missouri Highway Patrol's drug task force.

"Where is the commitment?" Meadows said.

Carnahan said the bigger picture sometimes is lost when state and federal budgets are pared.

"On the whole, there has been very good bipartisan support both in Washington and Jefferson City, but we are learning that this is more than a law enforcement issue. When cuts are made in one place, such as in foster care, there are effects elsewhere."

Shultz's son is serving seven years in state prison for meth possession. Her daughter-in-law is on probation for the same crime.

"I know people say that this had to be hard, but it wasn't," Shultz said. "My son is still in prison, and even now he says, 'Thank you' to me."

Her daughter-in-law, she said, can see her children only during supervised visits. Shultz said she administers tests to her daughter-in-law, to ensure that she stays clean.

As for her grandchildren? Shultz said she worries about the toll all this has taken on their young lives. They're now 6, 8 and 11.

"The kids understand all this," she said, with a touch of sadness in her voice. "They're street smart. They know all about electronic scales."